**Improving Quality: exchanging good practice in assessment**

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### ABSTRACT

According to the Quality Assurance Agency (www.qaa.ac.uk), “enhancement is more than a collection of examples of good practice which might spring up across an institution. It is about an institution being aware that it has a responsibility to improve the quality of learning opportunities where that is necessary, and to have policies, structures and processes to make sure that it can detect where improvement is necessary, and where a need to improve is detected, that something will be done about it.”

Edge Hill University’s quality processes have traditionally been used to identify areas of ‘quality deficit’ as well as instances of good practice and to disseminate the latter via the institution’s committees. However, we have so far struggled to track, capture and evaluate the outcomes of such dissemination. Recent external examiner reports indicate both conspicuous good practice and areas of quality deficit in two particular aspects of assessment: summative written feedback, and second marking and moderation. This project aims to enhance pedagogic practice through inter- and intra-faculty exchange, by:

1. Using intelligence from recent external examiner reports to identify potential areas for the development or enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment across the University;

2. Brokering contacts between subjects/ departments with a view to the exchange of thinking and application of practice;

3. Conducting a longitudinal Institutional research study of said relationship(s), focusing in particular upon:

• ‘Enablers’ and ‘barriers’ to inter-departmental working within the academic environment;

• Transferability of practice between different subjects and application of practice within a secondary environment, with a particular focus on improvement;

• Evaluation of outcomes with a view to informing the planning and development of future Edge Hill University CPD activity for academic staff;

• Wider dissemination through conference presentation and journal publication (as part of the project leader’s University Learning and Teaching Fellowship).

### KEYWORDS

Enhancement, brokerage, good+practice, assessment.

### Improving Quality: exchanging good practice in assessment

***Context***

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2011) has defined quality enhancement (QE) as *“Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities… [This] means that enhancement is more than a collection of examples of good practice which might spring up across an institution. It is about an institution being aware that it has a responsibility to improve the quality of learning opportunities where that is necessary, and to have policies, structures and processes to make sure that it can detect where improvement is necessary, and where a need to improve is detected, that something will be done about it*.” Edge Hill University’s quality management processes for (at subject level) validation, annual monitoring, external examining and periodic review and (at institutional level) deliberative committees and internal thematic audit have traditionally been used to identify areas of ‘quality deficit’ within academic provision, as well as instances of good practice. These are routinely evidenced in reports to the University’s Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC), Academic Quality Sub-Committee (AQSC) and Student Experience Sub-Committee (SESC) which enable dissemination to faculties, and via a handbook and wiki-based repository of guidance and exemplars associated with the University’s Undergraduate Degree Framework (UDF). Since academic year 2011-12, HEIs’ approaches to QE have been subject to standalone judgement at Institutional review which is reinforced within the current HEFCE consultation on the development of new risk-based approaches to Institutional review (2012). And yet in common with much of the sector Edge Hill has thus far struggled to evaluate the impact of its enhancement-focused activities: *“Having identified good practice, institutions speak frequently of dissemination, with regard to publishing, making available, highlighting etc, but without any evidence of how adoption and impact is to be effected”* (HEA, 2008); *“Good practice is not evidence of enhancement – the trick is to be able to translate it”* (HEA, 2009).

One of the challenges associated with evaluating good practice is the quality of evidence used to support such judgements. External examiner reports provide one of the few sources of genuinely independent evaluation of academic standards and their comparability across the sector: *“External examiners’ comments are reported to be one of the main ways in which good practice is identified*…[and] *There is evidence that as part of deliberating about the further embedding of QE, some institutions are reviewing how external examiners’ comments can contribute most effectively”* (HEA, 2008). Indicator 3 of the revised UK Quality Code on external examining (QAA, 2011) specifies that *“Awarding institutions expect their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations on good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment observed by the external examiners* [and] *opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students”.* Recent analysis of comments in external examiner reports for Edge Hill programmes in 2010/11 highlighted an apparent quality deficit in some subjects relating to two specific aspects of the assessment process – the provision of high-quality written feedback, and the operation of robust and transparent second marking and internal moderation. However, examiners had also identified instances where both of these were apparently managed successfully:

Fig. 1: *‘Mapping of (programme-level) quality deficits to examples of good practice cited by Edge Hill University external examiners in 2010/11 (‘Quality of Feedback’)’*

**Primary and Early Years Undergraduate Initial Teacher Training**

**Secondary Business Education**

**Undergraduate Computing**

**Undergraduate Health CPD**

**Foundation degrees in Public Health and Working with Vulnerable Adults (delivered by King George V College Southport)**

**Undergraduate Mental Health Nursing**

**Foundation degree in Supporting Teaching and Learning**

**Secondary Undergraduate Initial Teacher Training**

**Mathematics Specialist Teacher Programme**

**Undergraduate Health CPD**

**MA Education**

**Post-Compulsory Education and Training**

**Masters in Teaching and Learning**

**Undergraduate Marketing**

**BA (Hons) Childhood and Youth Studies and BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies**

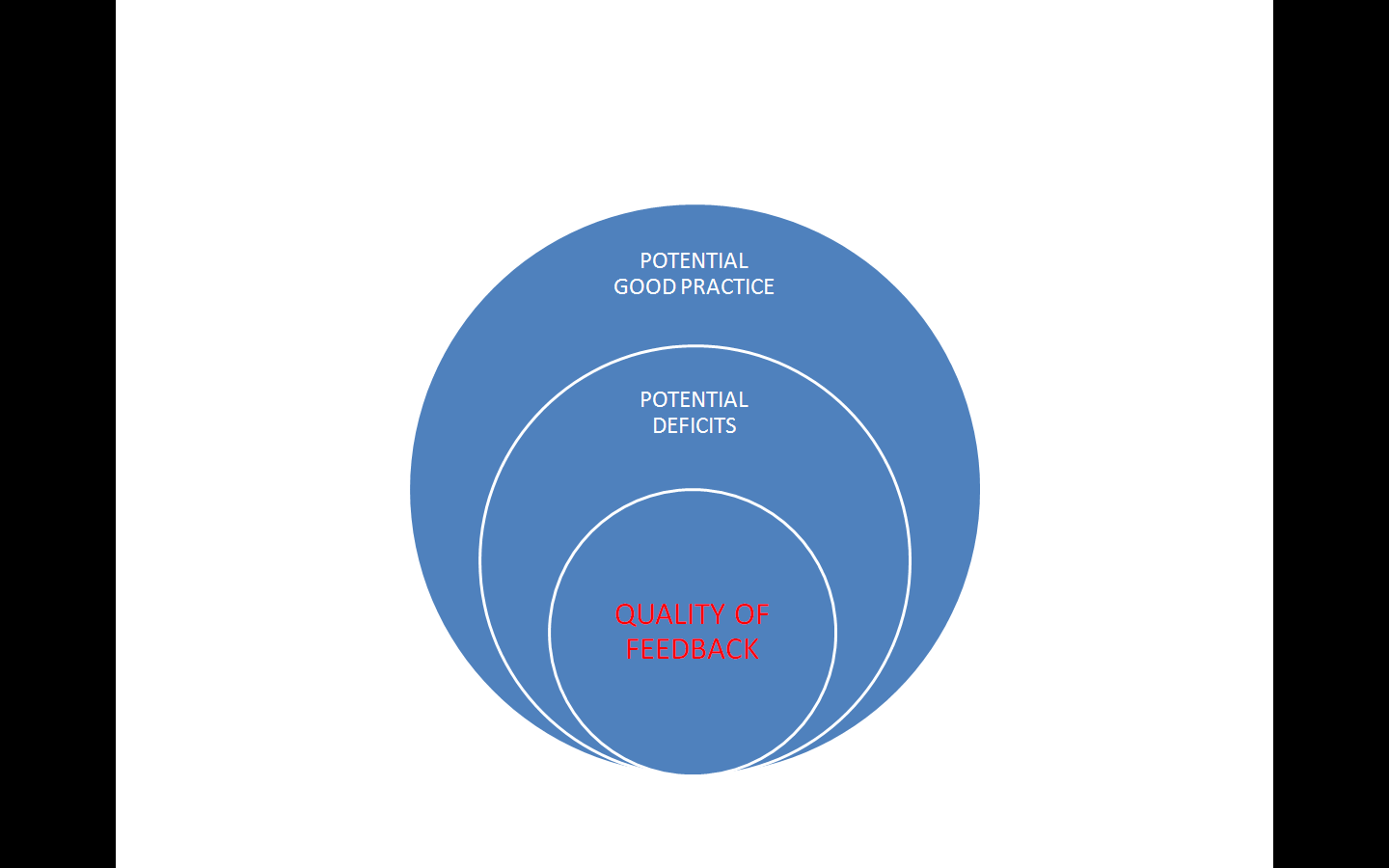
**BA (Hons) Film Studies and BA (Hons) Film Studies with Film Production**

**Foundation degree in Information Technology**

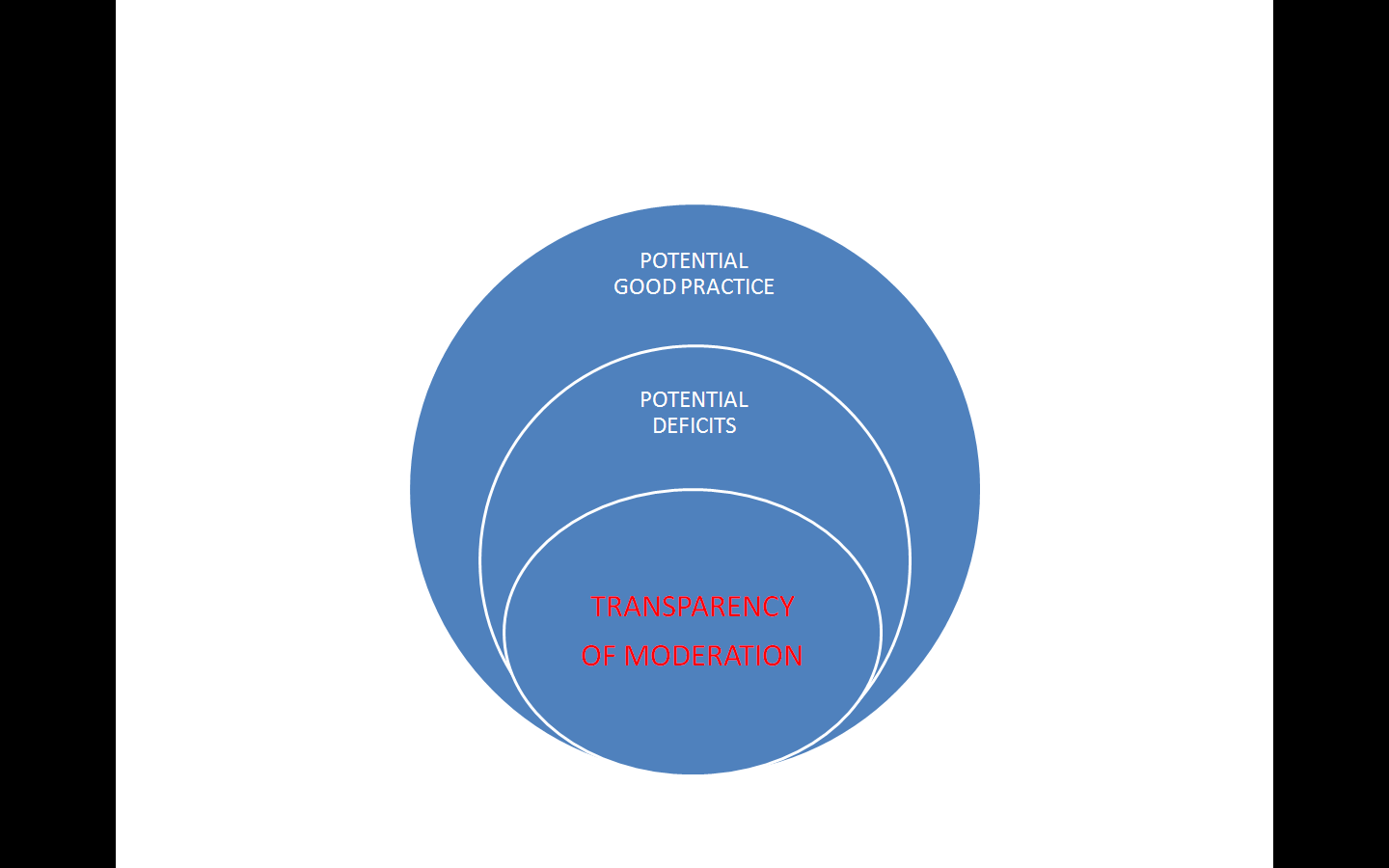
**LLB Law**

**MSc Contemporary Health and Social Care and MSc Advanced Practice**

**CertHE/ DipHE Health and Social Care**



*Fig. 2: ‘Mapping of (programme-level) quality deficits to examples of good practice cited by Edge Hill University external examiners in 2010/11 (‘Transparency of Moderation’)’*



**Foundation degrees in Working with Families and Communities and Playwork**

**Foundation degree in Supporting Teaching and Learning**

**Secondary Science Key Stage 2/3**

**Primary and Early Years Undergraduate Initial Teacher Training (Full-time)**

**Undergraduate Psychology**

**Undergraduate Accountancy**

**BSc (Hons) Coach Education**

**PGC Social Research Methods**

**DipHE Paramedic Studies**

***Proposal***

The project, which was to use external examiner comments for enhancing assessment practice, sought to illustrate the potential synergies between academic areas which might helpfully collaborate in developing and enhancing evidence-based pedagogic practice through a process of inter- and intra-faculty exchange. Its aims were to:

1. Use intelligence from recent external examiner reports to identify opportunities for the development or enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment across the University;
2. Use the concept of ‘brokerage’ – *“an intentional act in which the broker seeks to work in collaborative and creative ways with people, ideas, knowledge and resources to develop or change something”* (Jackson, 2003) - to pilot one or more inter-/ intra-faculty relationships between subjects/ departments with a view to exchanging thinking and application of practice;
3. Conduct a longitudinal Institutional research study of said relationship(s), focusing in particular upon:
   1. Enablers and barriers to inter-departmental working within the academic environment;
   2. Transferability of practice between different subjects and the application of practice within secondary environments, with a particular focus on improvement;
   3. Evaluation of outcomes with a view to informing the planning and development of future Continuing Professional Development activity for Edge Hill University academic staff;
   4. Possible publication in a refereed journal (as part of the project leader’s Learning and Teaching Fellowship).

The initial proposal was considered at the 8th February 2012 meeting of the University’s Student Experience Sub-Committee (SESC) where members recognised the potential value of using evidence from external examiners to enhance practice. However, the discussion also indicated concern that ‘brokering’ as described might risk alienating those areas that had received criticism from examiners, potentially stigmatising them as ‘failing’ departments, whilst those that had been commended may feel uncomfortable about being promoted as beacons of good practice among their peers. A further complication was the extent to which examiners’ reports sometimes lacked enough specificity about the practice being commented on – for example, under ‘quality of assessment feedback’ examiners may consider a range of issues from quality (detail), quantity (length) and format (e.g. handwritten versus typed feedback) to consistency of practice between markers and the distinction between these was not always made clear in reports. The issue of consistency was of particular concern to SESC members who felt that where examiners identified practice ranging from excellent to satisfactory (or perhaps lower) within the same department, exchange with the whole department may not be productive. Finally, the characterisation of the proposal as means of addressing quality deficits was itself anathema to those who felt that enhancement should be reinforcing rather than remedial and judgemental, distinguishing between QE as *“identifying inadequate practice and improving it, or as a process that continuously enhances the already excellent as well as the less good student experience”* (HEA, 2008). From this perspective, QE as a way *to “creatively exploit new opportunities or solve problems, to learn from existing good practice or to experiment with entirely new practice”* (Jackson, 2002) was perhaps a more apt description of what was actually being sought, and a research model based on techniques of Appreciative Inquiry therefore more appropriate.

The project leader was advised to consult further with faculties to address these issues and determine whether the brokerage concept remained feasible, or indeed desirable. The discussions that followed demonstrated support for the principle but proposed a complete re-think of how it should be achieved. Edge Hill was already in the process of developing mechanisms for ‘showcasing’ good teaching practice through a series of initiatives ranging between a nascent learning and teaching fellowship, a programme of practice-based seminars hosted by the University’s Centre for Learning and Teaching Research (CLTR), a wiki-based repository of guidance and practical artefacts linked to the Undergraduate Degree Framework and an annual cross-faculty Learning and Teaching Day for academic staff. In respect of the latter, the most significant challenge had been sourcing high-value case studies of good teaching practice – might evidence from external examiner reports help facilitate this?

***Development***

Following a series of meetings with faculty-based Senior Learning and Teaching Fellows it was agreed to modify the original proposal and use evidence from external examiner reports to harvest potential case studies on assessment practice for inclusion within the CLTR seminar programme and in particular, the 2013 Learning and Teaching Day. Further discussions on implementation have yet to take place but the following illustration shows a possible process and timeline to achieve this:

**JUNE 2012:** External Examiners’ Sub-Committee reviews the external examiner’s report template in the light of new QAA Quality Code requirements with a view to achieving greater specificity in examiners’ comments (for enhancement).

**SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2012:** Head ofAcademic Quality(HoAQ)reviews external examiner reports for 2011-12 academic session and compiles report for Academic Managers Group highlighting areas of good practice/‘quality deficit’.

**NOVEMBER – DECEMBER 2012:** Convene meeting with Senior Lecturer in Teaching and Learning Development and Senior Learning & Teaching Fellows to consider HoAQ’s report and identify potential showcasing opportunities. SL&TFs undertake discussions at faculty level with a view to securing engagement from departments. SLTLD finalises CLTR Seminar programme for 2013.

**JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2013:** Programme for University Learning and Teaching Day agreed through faculty associate deans for confirmation to the March 2013 meeting of Learning and Teaching Committee. CLTR Seminar programme underway.

**MARCH - APRIL 2013:** Development of departmental case studies for 2013 Learning and Teaching Day. CLTR Seminar programme continues.

**MAY 2013:** Learning and Teaching Day (date TBC) & **JUNE 2013:** CLTR Seminar programme concludes.

**JUNE - SEPTEMBER 2013:** Evaluation of impact of departmental showcasing for reporting to the October 2013 meeting of Learning and Teaching Committee. Case studies and associated practical artefacts made available to staff via the UDF wiki.

***Conclusion and questions***

While the project remains ‘work in progress’ several issues associated with its implementation are subject to further discussion and resolution:

1. What adjustments can be made to the external examiner’s report form to generate more detail and specificity so that good practice with showcasing potential may be identified and evaluated?
2. What should be the benchmarks against which good practice is evaluated *– “the idea that a particular change is an enhancement is often contested* [and]… *creates difficulties when we come to objective evaluation”* (Jackson, 2002) – and is external examiner verification sufficient without some additional point(s) of reference?
3. How can the transferability of good practice from one area to another be evaluated in order to establish potential for wider dissemination/ showcasing - *“the familiar debate about good practice in one area or discipline being normal practice elsewhere with perhaps limited potential for broader application”* (HEA, 2009)?
4. What are the most effective institutional mechanisms for engaging stakeholders – *“brokers need to think about the systems in which they are operating”* (Jackson, 2003), e.g. communities of practice such as deliberative committees and working groups, or would direct intervention at department level be more effective? What incentives can be offered to potential contributors - *“Several institutions refer to the challenge of engaging busy academics in QE… The time of academics, already under pressure from a number of demands, is in short supply for any new initiatives”* (HEA, 2008). How might stakeholder scepticism/ resistance be overcome?
5. Where and how will the impact on teaching be evaluated, either within or outwith existing processes for annual monitoring and periodic review?

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